URBAN-RURAL BALANCE IN REGIONAL PLANNING

PANEL PRESENTATION

by

ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
OLDMAN RIVER REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

ALBERTA PLANNING BOARD CONFERENCE
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CREATION OF AN URBAN-RURAL BALANCE IN THE ORGANIZATION OF THE OLDMAN RIVER REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

John Zoeteman
Councillor, M.D. of Willow Creek
Chairman of the O.R.R.P.C.

A RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON REGIONAL PLANNING

- The nature of the organization of the Oldman River Regional Planning Commission leads to a good balance between urban and rural members, interests and values.
- Often planning is looked upon strictly from an urban perspective.
- Rural areas are regarded as areas to provide amenity and recreation, a place for undesirable industry, and uses that towns and cities will not accept.
- Rural areas are often considered as areas lying vacant that should be protected at all costs for future urban expansion, annexation and use.
- Rural areas are often perceived as "*what is left over*" after urban development has taken place, lying vacant for urban needs.
- The value of rural areas as places of human settlement and agricultural production are often overlooked or, perhaps more kindly, given less priority. Often the rural municipalities and the agricultural community are treated as second-class citizens to serve wishes of the urban majority.
- This is often the result of the political system, since rural areas have less population and therefore are perceived to have less influence on political decision-making.
- Rural municipalities also cover large areas in the regional planning areas, therefore there tend to be more regional policies dealing directly with rural areas, and as a result the rural areas need a strong input into regional planning. However, most urban municipalities want a say on the land use decisions that are made in their fringe. Regional planning commissions should make corresponding adjustments to their structures to overcome this potential for conflict to ensure that both urban and rural municipalities have a meaningful amount of input into regional decisions that affect their municipality and adjoining municipalities. There should be a balance between urban-rural interests in all aspects of regional planning.

ROLE OF COMMISSION MEMBERS

- If the rural members are totally outnumbered by the urban members, and the urban members are not aware of rural needs, there is a serious problem.
- Rural members in this case could not participate in regional decision making — decisions dealing with the operation and policy of the Commission and, most importantly, decisions that affect the rural municipality. The result is obvious — alienation, lack of harmony, apathy, and perhaps bitterness and frustration with regional planning that simply does not meet their municipality's needs nor understand their problems.

- Some urban municipalities suffer from a double standard; they want control of the rural areas in their fringe, but will not allow the rural municipality any input into urban decisions. This usually develops into a grave communication problem which leads to a lack of co-ordination in planning for both municipalities, resulting in high costs to both, and causing many land use problems.

THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

- In the Oldman River Region there are 41 member municipalities — 8 are rural, and 33 are urban.
- There is a carefully set up committee system to maintain urban-rural balance in the Oldman River Regional Planning Commission.
- Specifically, these are the Subdivision Committee and the Rural Land Use Committee that prepared the amendment to the Regional Plan covering rural land use policies.
- Our Subdivision Committee was originally elected at large from the membership. This procedure caused difficulty since the municipal districts and counties felt outvoted.
- This was a critical problem since many of the applications are from rural areas, and certainly the most controversial and difficult applications are in the rural municipalities. (In 1979-80, 52% of the applications were from rural municipalities - 223 out of the 429 applications dealt with.) Therefore the organization of the Subdivision Committee was changed.
- All eight rural members are permanently represented on the Subdivision Committee, including I.D. No. 6.
- Six permanent urban members are elected at large from the Commission membership.
- Two rotating members are chosen from other municipalities. Thus each member gets experience in making subdivision decisions and there is not too much of a rural bias, but rather a good balance between urban and rural interests.
- In dealing with rural problems, there is strong rural input; and in dealing with urban problems, there is strong urban input. Both balance each other.
- Rural members are often familiar with towns and villages in their districts. They use them to market cattle and grain, buy goods and services, and for contact with government and personal services.
- The urban members rely on the rural area both economically and socially.
- Networks of friends and relatives and business acquaintances do not stop at the municipal boundaries. Many town and village residents are directly or indirectly involved in rural enterprises, just as people are related. There needs to be a good relationship between local by-laws and the regional plan. They are complementary to each other and work together for better communities within the region.
- Because the region is diverse, there needs to be some flexibility in regional policies. This should only go as far as the commission members will allow, after a consensus of both urban and rural members is obtained.

- The members of the Subdivision Committee work together to form a consensus in making decisions on subdivision applications, taking into consideration the interpretation of the Regional Plan policies, land use by-laws, and the General Municipal Plan.

- Because rural representation is from every rural municipality in the region, and there is fairly evenly distributed urban membership, there is a balanced geographic representation. One part of the region does not tend to dominate the commission.

- The Rural Land Use Committee that proposed the amendment to the Regional Plan was similarly composed and balanced. All rural municipalities, and an approximately equal number of urban municipalities were on this committee.

- On the Rural Land Use Committee there was good representation from throughout the region. A consensus was worked out with the active involvement of all rural members before the Rural Land Use Amendment was adopted by the full membership in amending the Regional Plan.

- The Commission is removed from the community, yet members can appreciate the problems. Not all the decision makers are ultimately involved in the particular community. The Commission as a whole (rather than local individuals) makes the decisions - hopefully based on objective good planning principles.

THE REGIONAL PLAN

- Decisions are based on the relationship with local land use by-laws. We have a (very general) regional plan that is both regulatory and advisory and tries to protect agricultural land, promote orderly and economic development, and advance the quality of life in the region.

- It has broad standards with room for each rural municipality to be more restrictive or specific in controls.

- Each municipality can adopt policies in all or part of its municipality in accordance with the Regional Plan. There is, therefore, a good deal of flexibility in the Regional Plan.

LOCAL BY-LAWS

- Local by-laws include the Land Use By-law, the General Municipal Plan, as well as Area Structure Plans. These need both urban and rural input.

- These by-laws are drafted by the O.R.R.P.C. staff who have day-to-day contact with subdivision-development problems in the municipality, and with regional planning that stresses regional-local and urban-rural balance. This experience can be combined for the benefit of the municipality.

- The Councils also become aware of what is happening in adjoining municipalities through the area-planning-team approach in providing advisory planning services, and through participation in the regional planning commission.

PROVINCIAL LIAISON

- Regional planning commissions can act as a body for quickly getting regional input to different municipalities from the provincial government on such proposals as:
    - power lines,
    - irrigation schemes,
    - highways,
    - airports,
    - government programs (municipal financing and grants).

- There is a need for close contact with M.L.A.'s.

- Perhaps one M.L.A. from the region should be appointed as a member of the regional planning commission.

- Through the regional planning commission the province, in one contact, can gain the experience and opinion of a wide variety of municipalities.

- Perhaps the chairman and/or the director of the regional planning commission should be appointed to the Alberta Planning Board for liaison purposes.

CONCLUSION

- Is there a need to abolish regional planning commissions, or simply reorganize them to be more effective?

- We feel organization should achieve a reasonable rural-urban balance that will meet the planning needs of both rural and urban members.

- We recommend that legislation should be kept as it is at present. It is the organization and operation of a commission that needs to be sensitive to both urban and rural concerns, as well as to the interests of the region as a whole.

- A Regional Plan, to be effective, should be endorsed by a majority of both urban and rural members. Without strong support from the members, a commission cannot function nor will its regional plan work, since the member municipalities largely make decisions and take actions that implement the regional plan.

BALANCE FROM AN URBAN PERSPECTIVE

Dwight Powell,
Mayor, Town of Nanton,
Member of the O.R.R.P.C.

INTRODUCTION

- Earlier we have heard from our Chairman, John Zoeteman, on the characteristics of urban/rural balance from a rural perspective. As the member of the O.R.R.P.C. from the Town of Nanton, I would like to address urban/rural balance from an urban - specifically our Town's - perspective.

- The Planning Act, 1977 outlines very specific and limited roles for regional planning commissions in the province. These are:

  (1) to provide advisory planning services to its member municipalities
  (2) to develop a regional plan
  (3) to be the subdivision approving authority
  (4) to involve and inform the public in the broad process of planning for Alberta's future.

  I will use these statutory roles as a framework for my discussion on urban-rural balance.

CO-OPERATION BETWEEN MUNICIPALITIES AND REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSIONS

- Please note that these statutory roles are not exclusively the responsibility of the regional planning commissions; each member municipality must be prepared to share in these responsibilities if local and regional planning is to work. Without a local commitment and co-operation, the regional planning commissions can be totally frustrated in their objectives of regional and municipal planning.

- The town can also fail to deal effectively with its most pressing planning problems without this co-operation.

- Local co-operation between a member municipality and a regional planning commission means open communication both ways, sharing of information, mutual development of planning objectives, mutual respect, and most importantly, good personal relationships between staff, members, and councils. Each should treat the other as they wish to be treated; hopefully in that way barriers will be broken down and a good clear understanding of where planning is focused in the community, and who is responsible for each decision, will be established. Subsequently a good working relationship will be created.

- This relationship enables strong municipal input into regional planning and its implementation through subdivision approval, and also regional input into local planning such as General Municipal Plans, Land Use By-laws, and development decisions.

- A mutually shared responsibility should mean more careful consideration of decisions . . . better input from different perspectives . . . it should mean support for politically difficult decisions.

- I conclude that if the functions laid out in The Planning Act are to be effectively achieved to the benefit of the province, the region, and the local municipalities, a better attitude of "shared responsibility" needs to be developed. Perhaps the term "balance" can be effectively substituted for this concept.

URBAN-RURAL BALANCE

- A balance between urban and rural interests, and between regional and municipal interests is needed.

- There needs to be a regional-local balance of interest, values and policy, as well as an urban-rural balance.

- Specifically this can occur in (1) municipal advisory planning services, (2) in the Regional Plan, and (3) in subdivision approving authority.

(1) **Municipal Advisory Planning Services**

- For municipal advisory planning services the O.R.R.P.C. is divided into geographic areas. This means that the same staff works with adjoining municipalities. The Town of Nanton and the M.D. of Willow Creek are handled by the same planning team, and this helps when dealing with issues that affect both (i.e. annexations, industrial park, Golf Course expansion).

- There is mutual support from other commission members on difficult planning issues (i.e. dealing with Marathon Realty on railway lands, downtown redevelopment)

- Towns can also take advantage of a larger and diverse staff that we could not afford on our own (i.e. design services for the town parks; new industrial, commercial, and residential areas).

- Nanton is a local agricultural service centre and has recently developed a new General Municipal Plan. The rural area was involved in the process of preparing this General Municipal Plan through questionnaires.

- The rural residents play a key role in our community through service clubs, recreation teams, churches, etc. Locally they have been involved in planning and implementing such projects as the expansion of the HUB (a recreation complex) and the Cozy Corner Drop-In Centre. They should also be involved in making decisions on more general planning policy. A regional planning commission can easily encourage this co-operation in the preparation of by-laws and general municipal plans.

- The reality of life in a rural community or village or town is that subdivision approval at the regional level, with strong local input, actually enhances local autonomy.

- At the regional level the decision can be more objective; personalities are not involved . . . the need to make hard decisions grows as a community grows, and encourages and accommodates growth in a beneficial fashion . . . local councils are quite capable of making these decisions, but they **do** have to live and carry on business in their community. A responsive, slightly more removed body can make an equally good decision, and enable the local councillor to stay in a position of serving his electors, yet not being unduly pressured by them into making poor decisions in the public interest.

(2) **Regional Plan**

- Balance can be encouraged in developing the Regional Plan by a carefully selected committee system. Each committee that reviews the Plan is representative of both rural and urban municipalities. John explained the composition of our Subdivision and Rural Land Use Committee, so I will not repeat this, other than to say that urban input into these committees enables regional policy to better reflect the needs of the region.

(3) **Subdivision Approving Authority**

- This is an essential function of the regional planning commissions; it enables us to implement our regional plan, keeps all members involved in meaningful decision-making and monitoring what is happening in each community.
- Often it provides issues for dialogue back and forth between adjoining municipalities on mutual problems.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

- Regional planning commissions can be objective in gathering public input from more than one municipality in dealing with regional and sub-regional issues . . . they can collect ideas from both urban and rural municipalities without the *"why should we listen to them . . . they are not town residents"* conflict, or *"us vs. them"*; or in a rural area *"who are they . . . they live in town"*.
- In this sense the regional planning commissions are in an excellent position to meaningfully involve the members of the public on issues that affect all people living in the Nanton district.

CONCLUSION

- We need to work on fine-tuning the balance on regional planning commissions. This can be done using the existing Planning Act and planning system. Organization and relationship, an attitude of mutual responsibility, sharing, and learning will greatly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of municipal and regional planning in Alberta.

URBAN PRESSURES ON RURAL AREAS

Lloyd Trapp,
Councillor, County of Lethbridge
Member of the O.R.R.P.C.

COUNTY OF LETHBRIDGE

- I represent a rural municipality - the County of Lethbridge - which surrounds the City of Lethbridge and a number of other urban municipalities.

- The County of Lethbridge is one of the most agriculturally-productive rural municipalities in the Province of Alberta. We have a high percentage of Class 1 and 2 soils, as well as a substantial area with irrigation.

URBAN PRESSURES ON RURAL AREAS

- Because of its location, the County of Lethbridge is under considerable pressure for urban or non-agricultural development, particularly in the fringe areas surrounding urban municipalities and along highways.

- It is necessary for the County to protect agriculture - its economic base and lifeblood. In addition, I believe we should safeguard the growth and development of our urban communities by controlling sprawl. I believe that regional planning can help the County in achieving both of these objectives.

- The urban uses most in demand in the County are country residences (throughout the County, but in particular near the urban centres) and industrial and commercial land uses in the fringe areas around some of our communities, particularly the City of Lethbridge, and along highways.

- The major problem with country residential development in our municipality is a conflict between country residences and feedlots and other agricultural operations, particularly in irrigated areas.

- The pressure for urban development, particularly commercial and industrial development in fringe areas, largely occurs because:
  - sufficient land may not have been made available for the purpose within the urban municipality,
  - land in the fringe area is cheaper than within the urban municipality,
  - urban services may not be required (at least at first),
  - the developers wish to locate at the entrance to a community, or
  - merely because the applicant happens to own the land.

- Urban municipalities object to fringe development because they feel the development will prejudice the orderly and economic growth of the urban community.

URBAN-RURAL PROBLEMS

- A particular problem perceived by a rural municipality is that they have to control development to safeguard the growth of an urban municipality, but obtain no (tax) benefit for themselves. This is particularly hard if they have to say "no" to county residents and taxpayers.

- Some rural municipalities feel that they must increase their tax base to provide the revenue they require in order to carry out their functions. They feel the establishment of industrial or commercial areas will give them the revenue they require. This can be a two-edged sword and may not be necessary. It may also not be in the best interests of an agriculturally-oriented municipality.

- In some cases the rural municipality's task is made harder if the urban municipality is not specific about its long-range planning proposals and direction of growth; also in some cases where it (the urban municipality) fails to stick to its plans.

- The high cost of land in fringe areas encourages some people to wish a change in land use from agricultural to other more lucrative uses such as commercial, industrial, or residential. This pressure then pushes the speculative value of land up higher which in turn creates more pressure for land use change.

- Annexation applications are an increasing source of urban-rural conflict. Although it is legitimate for urban municipalities to require land for future growth, they often ask for considerably more land than they require for this purpose.

- The rural municipality objects because of:
  - loss of tax base,
  - loss of agricultural land,
  - the urban municipality usually asking for more rural land than is required, and
  - disruption of school-bussing arrangements.

- If premature annexation takes place, the farmers of land which has been annexed feel that urban municipalities do not understand their problems as well as do the rural municipalities (i.e. upkeep of roads, snow plowing, etc.; also higher taxes).

- A considerable amount of money is being spent by both urban and rural municipalities on consultant fees for annexation hearings. Most of this would be unnecessary if:
  there was more co-operation, mutual trust, and co-ordination of planning and development between adjoining urban and rural municipalities. Urban municipalities should make the rural municipality aware of their land requirements and direction of growth early in the process. Rural municipalities should have regard to the future growth of urban municipalities in controlling development in fringe areas, and have close liaison with the urban municipality.

VALUE OF REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSIONS IN RESOLVING URBAN-RURAL PROBLEMS

- Because of the nature of urban pressures, rural municipalities require the support and guidelines from other bodies such as regional planning commissions and the provincial government.

- I believe regional planning, if properly carried out, is in the best interests of both urban and rural municipalities.

- The Regional Plan is an opportunity for urban and rural municipalities to sit down and decide on policies to resolve common problems.

- The Regional Plan should be sensitive to both urban and rural concerns, and allow for the development of the region in the best interests of both urban and rural municipalities. It should establish rules and guidelines, and establish a framework within which municipalities can carry out their own detailed planning.

- I believe a key function of regional planning commissions is to co-ordinate the development needs of urban and rural municipalities and to provide a forum for urban and rural municipalities to discuss common problems. If this is properly carried out, I believe we could avoid many of the conflict situations presently occurring between urban and rural municipalities over annexation.

- Many of the decisions concerning development in rural areas become very political in nature and there is the danger of councils, due to pressures, acting in an inconsistent manner, and making decisions which may not be the best in the long term.

- It can be a great help to municipalities for regional planning commissions to be subdivision approving authorities, and subdivision to be controlled by a Subdivision Committee in which there is both urban and rural membership.

- The Subdivision Committee is able to make decisions in an objective and non-political manner. It also gives an opportunity for a second opinion, and it can take the heat off the municipality. I don't believe it interferes with the local autonomy of a municipality because the Subdivision Committee is bound by the County's Land Use By-law. Also, if Council does not like the Subdivision Committee's decision, it can appeal to the Alberta Planning Board.

OBTAINING A FINANCIAL BALANCE

D. Cam McKay
Mayor, Town of Milk River
Member of the O.R.R.P.C.

INTRODUCTION

- Prior to the establishment of the Alberta Planning Fund, municipalities paid the regional planning commissions directly for services received. Even though the Province contributed 50% of the costs (and later 60%), regional planning was impossible; and rural-urban membership and balance was very haphazard. For example, in the Oldman Region some municipalities, once they had received the amount of planning they desired, refused to pay their annual fees and dropped their membership.

- Regional planning was impossible because municipalities could belong to the commission one year and drop out the following year. It is difficult to plan **around** municipalities that are not a member of a regional planning commission. During those early years, municipality membership made the region look like a piece of swiss cheese.

ALBERTA PLANNING FUND

- With the establishment of the Alberta Planning Fund, commission finances became more stable, membership in our region increased to 100%, and urban-rural balance became possible.

- The large contributions from the Alberta Government to the Alberta Planning Fund also created a form of regional-provincial balance.

- The amount of provincial contribution to the Fund has little or no effect on local autonomy **provided** the decision making within regional planning commissions remains the responsibility of local elected representatives. The degree of local decision making is in direct ratio to local autonomy. The more provincial regulations there are, the more they decrease the decision-making choices of local elected representatives, and therefore there is less local autonomy.

- Decision-making within the Oldman River Regional Planning Commission has remained in the hands of the local elected officials. (School boards are an example of provincial regulations to the point that little or no choices are left for local elected representatives.) I believe a contribution by the provincial government of at least 80% of the Alberta Planning Fund is both fair and realistic.

RATES OF MUNICIPAL CONTRIBUTIONS

- I believe in inter-municipal co-operation and a regional approach to planning in which all municipalities (rural-urban, large-small, rich-poor) can be accommodated.

- Equitable rates of contributions to the Alberta Planning Fund are essential. These should be low enough to encourage all municipalities to remain within regional planning commissions.

- Equitable rates will encourage inter-municipal co-operation and encourage municipalities to collectively and equitably plan for the balanced development of all communities in Alberta.

- At present there is a significant difference between the mill rate paid by municipalities with subdivision approving authority and those who do not have subdivision approving authority. Municipalities with higher equalized assessments pay large amounts to remain in regional planning commissions, but would pay very little if they went independent. This encourages more and more municipalities to opt out of regional planning commissions, and can lead to inter-municipal conflict and doughnut planning.

- With more municipalities going independent, the cost will shift to fewer municipalities. The smaller and poorer municipalities will have to bear the burden of the costs of regional planning commissions. The result will be either more provincial funding or gradual death of regional planning commissions. This will damage smaller municipalities and affect all of Alberta.

- Municipalities with subdivision approving authority benefit from planning that is carried out by neighbouring municipalities. This factor should be reflected in their contribution to the Alberta Planning Fund. Independent urban municipalities benefit from rural planning, and independent rural municipalities benefit from urban planning.

- Planning in rural municipalities not only protects rural areas from undesirable development, but mainly benefits urban dwellers who use the rural areas as their recreation area.

- Many rural areas, including small urban municipalities, feel that much of the planning in their areas is to control development for the benefit of larger urban areas. Therefore the large urban areas should pay more.

SUBDIVISION FEES

- Subdivision application and approval fees for an individual lot cost less than a bottle of whisky. The user of the service must pay a reasonable rate for the service — especially for subdivision fees. The present subdivision application and approval fees barely meet the cost of newspaper advertising of subdivision approvals.

- We must re-examine the old argument that increased subdivision fees will be passed on to purchasers of lots and affect people on low income the most. Surely those who can afford to pay $50,000 to $100,000 for a house can afford to pay $100 or $1,000 for subdivision fees. Market supply and demand for houses, and interest rates have a far greater impact on housing prices than subdivision fees.

CONCLUSION

1. The Alberta Planning Fund is essential for regional planning to be effective.
2. The Province has an obligation and must continue to pay a large portion of the costs of the Alberta Planning Fund.
3. Municipal contributions to the Fund must be low enough and equitable enough to encourage municipalities to remain in regional planning commissions.
4. Large urban municipalities must pay more into the Fund because they benefit from regional planning.
5. Subdivision fees must be increased.

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